



Reading First Sustainability
Literature Review

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Introduction

To date, Reading First schools are showing significant success in meeting student reading outcomes (National Evaluation of Reading First, 2006). This success is partly due to key characteristics that make Reading First unique among other federal programs. These characteristics include (1) a focus on scientifically based reading research and instruction, (2) data-based decision making, (3) measurable results and accountability, and (4) fidelity to the reading curriculum. Though these four characteristics define the Reading First initiative, it is the dedication and commitment of the Reading First community to faithfully implement these characteristics that have enabled student achievement results to reach the levels where they are today.

Nevertheless, the Reading First community is concerned with its ability to sustain impressive student achievement results in light of inevitably disappearing federal funding. Consequently, the Reading First community is looking for guidance in determining which aspects of the initiative are important to sustain, and how to successfully create and implement a Reading First sustainability plan.

This concern is well-founded, considering that studies of educational programs show that sustaining results past the funding period cannot be taken for granted. For example, one longitudinal case study of sustainability in the Comprehensive School Reform Program showed that after three years, only five of the thirteen schools studied continued to implement their comprehensive school reform models with moderate to high levels of intensity (Datnow, 2005). Among the findings of this study was the indication that many schools could not sustain their reform programs because they had done little practical planning for monitoring the implementation and progress of the program over time; they had no plan for sustainability. In addition to the Datnow study, many findings have shown that it is primarily the strategies for dealing with changes (in district and state contexts), as well as the capacity to deal with said changes, that affect an entity's ability to sustain a reform.

This review examines literature on the sustainability of school reform efforts in order to determine key sustainability concepts as they relate to Reading First. State directors of Reading First who are looking at promoting sustainability within their states will need a framework and a few key messages to guide districts and schools as they work to sustain scientifically based reading instruction programs. A foundational definition of the characteristics of sustainability will lend cohesiveness and focus to these efforts. States or districts can use this document as an introduction to sustainability characteristics as they undertake long-term planning for sustaining their Reading First programs.

The starting point in defining key messages is a definition of sustainability. We suggest the following:

Sustainability is the ability of a program to operate on its core beliefs and values (its reading culture) and use them to guide essential and inevitable program adaptations over time while maintaining improved outcomes.

Adapted from Century and Levy, 2002

This definition focuses on some of the characteristics that are most important in sustaining an education reform like Reading First. First, there is recognition that educators exist in a perpetually changing context. At all levels—school, district, and state—there are constant pressures and temptations to respond to emerging priorities that represent the latest hypothesis of what will improve student achievement. Within this ever-changing environment, a culture that values scientifically based instructional approaches and a commitment to continuously serve students more effectively are the most basic foundation from which sustainability will emerge.

Characteristics of Sustainability

Current scholarship on sustainability reveals some of the most important characteristics of sustainability. (Incidentally, “scholarship” is the most appropriate word, as there is no base of scientifically rigorous research on this topic.) Included in current scholarship are: several high-quality case studies that are appropriate to the research questions that are being asked; some thoughtful description of successfully and unsuccessfully sustained reforms; and pieces based on expert opinion. Through examination of twenty-one documents, most of which were published within the past five years (see annotated bibliography), several key sustainability characteristics emerged:

- 1) Sustainability is possible when full implementation has been achieved.
- 2) Sustainability is based in the right organizational culture and leadership.
- 3) Sustainability always includes identification of critical elements of the education reform in question.
- 4) Sustainability requires continuing adaptation—not freezing a program in time.
- 5) Sustainability must be approached from a systems perspective.
- 6) Sustainability can and should be planned for and evaluated, and this should begin as early in the program life as possible.
- 7) Sustainability is only partly contingent on replacing funding.

Each of these characteristics of sustainability is discussed briefly in the following sections, first in terms of what the literature says, and then by drawing out implications for sustaining Reading First.

1. Sustainability is possible when full implementation has been achieved.

Findings from the Literature

Every new education initiative that is introduced to schools proposes to represent change—change in teacher knowledge, skills, and practices and perhaps changes in attitudes and goals. Teachers implementing a new practice will go through predictable levels of implementation and express identifiable concerns as they work through the process of change (Hall & Hord, 2006). Gene Hall and Shirley Hord define this change process using two parallel and intersecting components within a framework called the Concerns-Based Adoption Model or C-BAM. The first component is a “stages of concern” continuum that describes a person’s level of awareness when engaged in the change process, beginning with *unaware* and progressing to *actively engaged*. The second component is the “levels of use” continuum that describes a person’s proficiency and comfort level with implementing the initiative’s principles, from *nonuse* to *expert use*. In early stages of initiative implementation, the initiative’s members’ level of use typically lies in the mechanical or routine stage. As higher levels of implementation are achieved, the members’ levels of use advance into the refinement, integration, and renewal stages. It is at these stages where sustainability is possible.

Another model for looking at stages of implementation is presented by Dean Fixon at the National Implementation Research Network, or NIRN. The NIRN stages of implementation begin with *exploration* and *installation*, progress to *initial* and *full implementation*, and finally move into *innovation and sustainability*. Similarly to C-BAM, it is when the highest ends of the continuum are reached that an initiative will survive long-term.

At the highest level of implementation, teachers have thoroughly mastered instructional techniques and are typically collaborating with their peers to discuss how the initiative can better serve students, while simultaneously assessing their efforts and making mid-course corrections (Horsely & Loucks-Horsely, 1998). In doing so, they are making adaptations that refine the effectiveness of the initiative. Therefore, we can think of sustainability as the end point of the implementation continuum, in which teachers are expert in methods and can modify their practice both individually and collectively, in service of increasing student outcomes. Schools that have a well-developed capacity to implement an initiative effectively are ready to take the next step to sustaining it. Indeed, the more teachers witness the positive impact of their refinements on student outcomes, the more enthusiastic they are for sustaining the initiative.

The implication is that schools need to reflect on their ability to address critical factors that are related to successful implementation. These factors include within-school support and leadership, integrated and continued professional development, community/external support, integration of the initiative into the school structure, data-based decision making, and an ongoing evaluation component (Brown & Spangler, 2006). Attention to the above factors over time will help an education reform reach a high level of implementation and

become part of the school culture. Initiatives that are implemented with fidelity are more successful in adapting over time than those that do not achieve full implementation prior to the adaptations (Fixen, Naoom, et al., 2005).

Implications for Reading First

Reading First schools that have achieved a high degree of skill in implementing their scientifically based reading instruction program, and have also attained success in student outcomes, will have the solid foundation required for allowing the initiative to successfully sustain over time. Conversely, Reading First schools that have not implemented with fidelity or with a high level of success may not be ready to focus on sustainability. They are more likely to need assistance in improving their level of implementation and increasing the buy-in, enthusiasm, and the “appetite for more” that come from success. These schools would therefore benefit from specific action planning to target the above implementation issues as well as others that are identified prior to developing a plan for sustainability.

States and districts need to have an understanding of the current level of implementation of scientifically based reading instruction programs in their schools with Reading First funding as a foundation to planning for sustainability. Knowing where you stand is essential to planning where you want to go.

2. Sustainability is based in the right organizational culture and leadership.

Findings from the Literature

Sustainability is embedded in organizational context and culture, which is often described by cultural anthropologists as “the way we do things around here.” The value system that supports educational reform is of critical importance. After all, how likely is it that an organization would sustain something they do not think is meaningful and important in achieving the goals they pursue? Let us now take some time to define organizational culture, since it is so important.

First and foremost, a strong school culture has a common vision for the initiative that is shared among all. This common vision is molded around the shared norms and values of the initiative members. This school culture serves as the foundation for an initiative—it can reduce staff isolation, increase school capacity, provide a caring, productive environment, and promote increased quality so that the vision can flourish (Boyd & Hord, 1994). As a result, an established school culture enables a school to become a professional learning community.

In a professional learning community, critical inquiry is practiced by collegial partners who share a common vision and engage in shared decision making (Boyd & Hord, 1994). Staff can engage in reflective dialogue and collaboration, and present a collective focus on student learning (Boyd & Hord, 1994). Therefore, ongoing communication and collaboration among staff is paramount to achieving a high level of sustainability for an initiative. Successful collaborations have diverse group membership, shared leadership, clear roles and responsibilities, defined goals, and a plan of action (Bryant, 2002). For these reasons, new staff members are carefully selected based on their ability to embrace the school's vision and successfully contribute to the established professional learning community. The principal's role is to ensure that the school has the capacity to create a process of continuous renewal that shifts skills and practices to new staff (Horner & Sugai, 2006).

Principals need to be at the center of building culture and capacity within their schools. To do this, they have to understand that school capacity consists of teachers' knowledge, skills, student expectations, and resources. Since the development of knowledge and skills are most likely to occur when teachers can concentrate on instruction and student outcomes in the specific contexts in which they teach, teachers need multiple opportunities to study, experiment, and collaborate with peers (King & Newmann, 2000). Learning in context takes place in study groups and in classrooms, so that teachers can share their collective knowledge, identify best practices, and monitor outcomes in ways that are significant to their teaching situations (Fullan, 2002). The principal, therefore, should take the following steps to facilitate capacity-building in a school:

- First, it is important that the principal distribute leadership responsibilities throughout the staff, so that a network of people, cultures, and structures forms naturally, based on the interrelations and connections among staff (Fullan, 2002). This shared leadership allows for the cultivation of future leaders and, at its best, includes teachers, students, and parents affected by the initiative (Hargreaves & Fink, 2003). As the principal supports the leadership of others, so begins a mentoring process that may result in a successor who can uphold the school's vision. Therefore, it is important that present leadership nurtures, cultivates, and, whenever possible, appoints a successor who has been groomed from within. This allows for present leadership to have control over the selection process, maintain continuity, and secure success of the initiative over time (Hargreaves & Fink, 2003).
- Secondly, the principal can support the school culture by maintaining time for staff to engage in collaborative discussion and planning. The principal should be at the helm of this collaboration and be "leading the learning" by nurturing the professional learning community and preserving continual learning (Hargreaves & Fink, 2003). By taking the lead in learning, the principal ensures that teachers' learning occurs in their own context, resulting in learning that is meaningful and tailored to students' needs. Better student learning is related to teachers having the support they need; a supportive school culture with the right leadership is a critical part of a school's capacity to sustain an educational reform.

The leadership and organizational culture requirements for sustaining Reading First are steep, but many schools are well on their way. Ultimately, the scientifically based reading instruction programs begun and supported with Reading First funds may simply become “the way student achievement in reading is supported” in a school, district, or even at a state level. This would represent a shift from Reading First being a federal program that provided development funds to a shared culture of how reading is taught—the highest pinnacle sustainability can reach.

Implications for Reading First

The Reading First principal is at the helm of creating a school culture that is centered on student achievement in reading. The principal, coach, and teachers share a common mission to create a community which fosters student and teacher learning, high expectations, and accountability in a safe, caring environment. If this culture is successfully created, teachers and students will feel valued as members of the school; teachers will be inspired to improve their teaching, and the school will be ready to face any challenges that may threaten the good work they have done thus far.

As part of the Reading First structure, grade-level study groups serve as the home base for collaborative discussion, learning, and planning. It is in these study groups that teachers’ knowledge of evidence-based instructional practices and reading research can be developed with the support of a reading coach. Through data analysis, teachers can collectively reflect on students’ strengths and weaknesses in reading and begin to take action. By collaborating, teachers develop deep conceptual understanding of skills and thus confidence in their ability to teach those skills. This capacity development only occurs if the school has a cohesive system in place that provides time in the schedule for regular discourse in support of student learning.

3. Sustainability always includes identification of critical elements of the education reform in question.

Findings from the Literature

The first step in sustainability planning is identifying what is to be sustained. Once the critical elements of the initiative are identified, educators can begin the process of pinpointing specific action steps. In school reform, the precise aspects of an initiative’s instructional practices, and how teachers develop the skills needed to implement them, should be a central element in sustainability planning.

Regardless of the particular pedagogical components of an initiative, the literature shows that teacher efficacy is a common thread. The concept of teacher efficacy (*i.e.*, teachers’ perception of their own teaching ability) is at the heart of effective teacher instruction.

Teachers who have strong beliefs in what they do, and believe that their teaching makes a difference in student outcomes, are more inclined to work to grasp the principles that underlie an initiative and conceptualize ways to make it more effective (Baker *et al.*, 2004). Teacher efficacy relies on convincing teachers to believe in what they do, and to take ownership of their teaching. This ownership occurs when teachers have influence over the substance and process of the professional development they receive and can develop mastery in the skills they are learning. Teachers who have time, resources, and technical support to develop competence in practice are more likely to continue the practice when faced with obstacles (Denton, Vaughn, & Fletcher, 2003). This, however, requires strong instructional leadership to provide appropriate support. If the instructional practice is valued by leaders, it improves the likelihood that teachers will continue the use of the practice (Denton, Vaughn, & Fletcher, 2003). Ideally, when skill proficiency is obtained, it can result in the practice sustaining, regardless of changes in leadership.

In addition to this, it is also worth noting that teachers may also need some encouragement in developing instructional autonomy. Teachers need more than deep conceptual knowledge; they need strategies for adapting practices to meet students' instructional needs (Vaughn, Klinger, & Hughes, 2000). The ability to modify an instructional practice greatly increases the likelihood that the practice will be sustained. By valuing and encouraging instructional autonomy, principals support teachers' abilities to appropriately adapt an initiative in ways that will be most effective to instruction.

Implications for Reading First

Teacher efficacy is closely related to culture and leadership, as discussed in the previous section. In addition, Reading First's critical elements include:

- Instruction,
- Curriculum,
- Formative assessment and use of data for instructional and systems planning,
- Use of time,
- Professional development, and
- Coaching.

Instruction refers to the teacher's methodology in communicating information to impart knowledge and skills to students. Research proves that explicit, systematic instruction is most effective for the teaching of reading. Explicit, systematic instruction is composed of specific delivery and design procedures. The delivery procedures include such features as direct teacher explanation and modeling, guided practice, corrective feedback, and monitoring. The design procedures consist of such features as stating the instructional purpose, teacher scaffolding, and cumulative review. These two characteristics are an important part of a research-based reading program.

Curriculum is the content and design of the research-based program used to teach reading. In Reading First, the research-based program selected must contain adequate content in the five essential reading components: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. In addition to being explicit and systematic, the curriculum design features include research-based instructional routines, classroom organization and management guidelines, and reading assessments. Curriculum also refers to supplemental and intervention materials used to support struggling readers.

Formative assessments are ongoing evaluations of students' reading progress in order to identify skill strengths and weaknesses and areas for further instruction. Assessment results provide immediate feedback to the teacher, which is useful in planning precise, differentiated instruction for all students. In addition to classroom use, grade, school, and district teams can use formative assessments by meeting regularly to analyze data, determine student progress, and make adjustments as needed.

Additionally, the assessment results can influence more than instructional adjustments; they can also inform system decisions relating to the use of time—*e.g.*, school calendar, school-wide scheduling, procedures and expectations, and professional development.

Professional development refers to the training, support, and guidance that is provided to teachers to increase their knowledge and expertise in the teaching of reading. The content of this professional development is often shaped by the assessment data, school goals, and observations conducted by the principal and reading coach.

The Reading First coach provides support to teachers through observing, modeling, and providing feedback to help improve the quality of teacher instruction. Coaches communicate information about best reading practices to teachers in grade-level meetings and through individual consultation. They collect and organize data, and facilitate data analysis sessions with the principal and/or grade-level teams. Coaches share responsibility with the principal in monitoring student reading outcomes and lead the professional development opportunities in their schools.

Along with remaining true to high-quality instruction that addresses the five reading components identified in the National Reading Panel Report (2000), there is a true need for the “what” that should be sustained to be the student achievement itself. There must be a relentless striving toward the goal that all students learn to read well, as a result of their needs being adequately understood and addressed.

4. Sustaining requires continuing adaptation and growth of the education initiative—not freezing a program in time.

Findings from the Literature

Sustainability is not just maintenance—it is more than simply keeping up a new practice past the implementation year or funding period. In order for an education reform to endure, leaders must intentionally nourish and prolong the reform by extending and adapting it over time (Jerald, 2005). It is inevitable that the initiative will face many forces that threaten to derail its focus. This is a real threat: schools that do not exhibit high levels of capacity may feel forced to leave behind an initiative as a result of high-stakes accountability demands (Datnow, 2005). However, leadership can promote sustainability by anticipating, influencing, and effectively responding to these potential changes (Bryant, 2002). When attempting to prolong an initiative, it is important to reflect on what is (and is not) working, and how the school can do even better (Jerald, 2005). A cyclical process of evaluating, identifying needs, and making adjustments to increase effectiveness is critical to extending an initiative's life (Fixsen, Naoom *et al.*, 2005). By allowing the initiative to adjust and adapt to changing conditions, while still maintaining its core principles, it is possible for the initiative to successfully sustain. The evolution of this process, however, requires strong internal systems to maintain the accepted standards and best practices of the initiative (Bryant, 2002).

Implications for Reading First

Since Reading First is primarily about implementing evidence-based instructional practices, maintaining fidelity to the scientifically based reading curriculum and assessing outcomes—one must be cautious not to deviate from the elements proven to produce high student outcomes. While it is expected that teachers will modify instruction based on student needs and that evidence-based reading programs will adapt in response to changing contexts, a careful balance needs to be reached so that the implemented modifications do not stray too far from the original foundation in scientifically based reading research.

5. Sustainability must be approached from a systems perspective.

Findings from the Literature

Sustaining an education reform like Reading First must be approached from a systems perspective, rooting itself in policies, procedures, and practices at the state, district, school, and classroom levels. Student achievement is affected by the quality of teacher instruction; teacher instruction is directly affected by school capacity; and school

capacity is directly affected by district and state policies, programs, standards, hiring and promotion procedures, and professional development (King & Newmann, 2000). These systems that scaffold an education initiative also influence the initiative's chances of sustainability. Regardless of an initiative's pedagogy, there are complicated interactions that take place among the initiative and contextual factors such as school culture, capacity, leadership, and policy in the school and district (Owston, 2006). In order for sustainability to be achieved, systemic changes need to occur. This requires shared governance of the initiative among various state agencies, and for the reform to be folded into existing complementary efforts within those agencies (Hamann & Lane, 2004). With successful systemic integration, the initiative remains part of the routine practice of the organization, despite changes in leadership and priorities (Johnson, Hays, Center & Daley, 2004). Sustainable change is most successful when capacity is distributed throughout the system monitoring the initiative's success (Century & Levy, 2004).

Implications for Reading First

For Reading First to sustain over the long-term, the agencies and systems that support the initiative must be aligned and balanced in their efforts. Collaboration is needed both vertically (between levels—school to district and district to state) and horizontally, or within levels. Reading First cannot be sustained by state or district Reading First directors alone. They need a collaborative relationship with a range of other leaders within their organization, as well as support from top leadership. This collaboration is absolutely necessary if Reading First is to make the transition between being a federal program with a funding stream to “the way reading is taught around here.” This will require ongoing dialogue between all involved with reading instruction in order to maintain a scientifically-based instruction model in which evidence-based practices are used.

6. Sustainability can and should be planned for and evaluated, and this should begin as early in the program life as possible.

Findings from the Literature

Creating a sustainability plan is a key element for sustaining an initiative, and such a plan should be created as closely as possible to the onset of the reform. The sustainability plan serves as a guiding document to remind staff of their mission, as well as to outline specific action steps that need to be taken. The critical components of a sustainability plan include a common vision as well as strong communication, management, and evaluation systems (Bryant, 2002).

Data-based decision making should be used to evaluate the initiative and guide change. Analyzing assessment data serves as a tool to motivate teachers to change instruction, continually improve, and determine if a program is progressing in a direction that will

help to achieve its mission (Bryant, 2002). Thus, sustainability should be regarded as any other outcome that is monitored and evaluated in a school or district.

Implications for Reading First

Since data analysis and data-based decision making are critical aspects of assessing student outcomes in Reading First, it seems natural to apply this approach to planning and evaluating for sustainability. Who should be planning for sustainability and evaluating the success of sustainability efforts? State departments of education, with the help of a Reading First leadership team, could identify key actions they might take to sustain scientifically based reading instruction. Local districts could also identify key sustainability actions and incorporate them into their strategic plans or other routine planning vehicle. Similarly, schools could embed sustaining strategies (or strategies for improving implementation, if needed) into their school improvement plans. These plans should include measurable objectives for identified sustainability strategies—both formative and summative, as well as clear goals for student achievement.

7. Sustainability is only partly contingent on replacing funding.

Findings from the Literature

Many people think sustainability is primarily about replacing funding that is coming to an end. From this review, it should be clear that sustainability is much more. Nonetheless, ensuring needed funding is important. Part of creating a comprehensive sustainability plan is identifying *what* is to be sustained, *what resources* are needed, and *how to access* those resources. Additionally it is also necessary to identify strategies to synchronize the resources with the vision in mind (Bryant, 2002). Once these items are identified, initiative leaders should secure funding as early as possible by considering a variety of funding options. These options can be found at the federal, state, and local level from both public and private sources (Afterschool Alliance). By diversifying the funding from multiple sources, initiative leaders may prevent the sudden financial drought that often occurs when relying on one funding source. A common result of this predictable drought is that sustainability expectations may be abruptly derailed. For that reason, it is imperative to have a strategic process for accessing the most appropriate funding source to support each particular component of the initiative (Wright & Deich, 2002). By analyzing each component separately, and aligning that component to a suitable funding source, you may guarantee the initiative's longevity. Initiative leaders need to be unrelenting in grasping opportunities when they arise (Wright & Deich, 2002).

Implications for Reading First

As federal funding for Reading First comes to a close, it is important to identify alternative funding options to effectively sustain the critical components of the initiative. This requires Reading First leaders to start thinking about potential funding streams *now* and begin to actively pursue them. Many existing federal programs may allow use of funds for purposes related to supporting reading instruction. State and local funds may also be available. Make some distinctions between recurring needs for resources (for instructional materials, for example) and big-ticket items related to staff positions, such as coaches. Consider the allowable uses of all funding streams going into a district or school, as you coordinate funding in service of the vision for how reading should be taught to have the greatest impact on students. Some schools may wish to pursue grants. In this case, Reading First leaders should capitalize on the expertise of their staff and share the school's reading achievements and commitment to high-quality and scientifically-based reading instruction. Discussions on accomplishments of the reading instruction program and potential funding sources should take place regularly and involve a wide range of stakeholders (including local boards of education), so all possible options can be considered. Ultimately, a well-informed community of stakeholders can be the most effective advocate for identifying funding to maintain and increase student success.

Conclusion

Sustainability is challenging for any education initiative. However, the literature guides us to several key factors that make it understandable and doable. First, envision sustainability as part of the implementation continuum—a stage at which an already successful reading instruction program, which was originally developed with seed money from the Reading First program, continues to grow and raise student outcomes. Second, be intentional about building a school culture that supports the goal of high achievement in reading and is true to the essential characteristics of evidence-based practices in reading. Third, make attempts from early on to plan and evaluate for sustainability. Finally, remember that funding is important, but there are many ways to address funding needs, especially if there is a culture supporting the reading instruction program and evidence of success.

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